

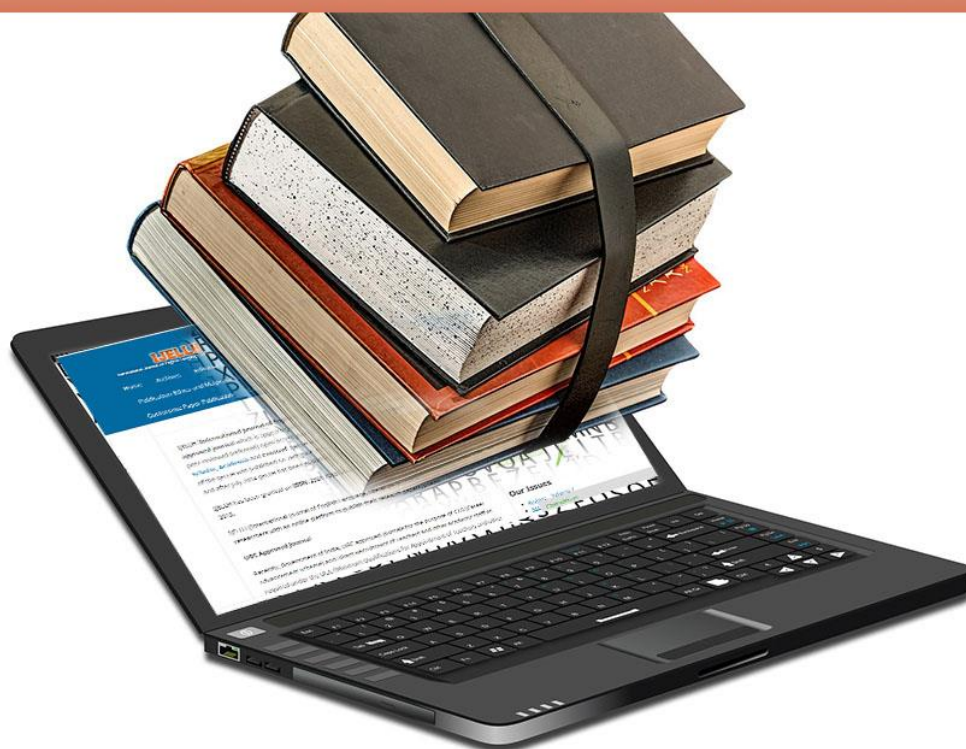
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Henry David Thoreau's Influence on Mahatma Gandhi

Abstract

Henry David Thoreau's influence on Mahatma Gandhi became worldwide when the South African newspaper *Indian Opinion* became easily available for study. It attracts the eyes of every Thoreauvian and Gandhian scholars. Probably in the every issue of *Indian Opinion* Gandhi expressed his obligations towards Henry David Thoreau. Before that it was difficult to seek the authentic sources which can confirm the influence of Thoreau on Gandhi. Roger Baldwin shares his talk with Gandhi in which Gandhi opines that Thoreau's essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* contains the essence of political philosophy. This philosophy is not related only to India's struggle for independence but he expressed his own views regarding the citizens' relation to the government. According to *Yale Review*, Gandhi read the essay when he studied law in London in 1907.

Gandhi himself said in the preface of the book *Indian Home Rule* that besides the Indian philosophers he was influenced by Thoreau, Emerson, Tolstoy, Ruskin and other writers. He opines that it is injustice to obey the law against our conscience. It directly means slavery. Manmade laws cannot bind a man who is fearless. At so many places throughout the book one can come to know that the principles and methods given by Thoreau in his essay has greatly

influenced Gandhi's mind. Whenever he talks of nonviolence, fearlessness, passive resistance and slavery he has much affinity with Thoreau. Gandhi remembers Thoreau while going into jail for Asiatic Registration Act. Thoreau also spent one night in jail when he refused to pay the poll tax and that experience he shared in his essay. During Gandhi's transformation from a lawyer to a political leader in South Africa he read Thoreau and therefore his influence matters much. There are also different views prevailing by different critics that it would be wrong to believe that whatever Gandhi did has nothing original and he just tried to follow whatever Thoreau said. This paper will endeavor to look at how Mahatma Gandhi was influenced by Thoreau's writings and he implemented in his technique *Satyagraha*.

Thoreau's influence in Gandhi's life became so significant because Thoreau influenced him in his transformation from lawyer to a political leader when he was in South Africa. There he started taking interest in politics. The Indians living in South Africa have taken racial discrimination as the part of their daily life. He tried to arouse a sense of dignity as a human being to the Indians. He persuaded them to resist against racism. He demanded many things as a matter of right such as first class train tickets and rooms in hotels which before him no one had probably even courage to ask for. South African experiment prepared Gandhi for the leadership of Indian national struggle. It built up his faith in the capacity of Indian masses to participate for the cause that moved them. He learnt that leadership involves not only facing the rage of the enemy but of the followers also. He understood that as a leader he will have to take hard decisions that are unpopular among his enthusiastic followers.

Webb Miller was the great admirer of Thoreau and Gandhi both. In his book *I Found No Peace: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent* (1936) he shared his talk with Gandhi in the chapter 'Homage to Gandhi' as following:

“The first question I put to him was:” Did you ever read an American named Henry D. Thoreau?” His eyes brightened and he chuckled.

“Why of course I read *Walden* first in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1906 and his ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian independence. Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau’s essay, ‘On the duty of Civil Disobedience’ written about eighty years ago. Until I read that essay I never found a suitable English translation for my Indian word, Satyagraha. You remember that Thoreau invented and practised the idea of civil disobedience in Concord, Massachusetts, by refusing to pay his poll tax as a protest against the United States government. He went to jail, too. There is no doubt that Thoreau’s ideas greatly influenced my movement in India.” (Miller, 230)

Miller explained why Gandhi accepted Thoreau’s ideas so rapidly. Thoreau has mentioned so many times in *Walden* that Vedas and Upanishadas have influenced him greatly. So it can be said that whatever Gandhi could receive from Thoreau was essentially what Indian philosophy gave to illuminate Thoreau’s mind. In *Indian Opinion* also Gandhi frequently mentioned Thoreau’s essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*.

In 1942, Gandhi wrote a letter *To American Friends* in which he has showed his indebtedness towards America to give him Thoreau, Britain to give him Ruskin and Russia to give him Tolstoy. He wrote:

“Moreover, you have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa.”

From this letter it became evident that during his campaign in South Africa the appeal of Thoreau's essay was very powerful. Asiatic Registration Act which was also known as 'Black Act' in South Africa. Gandhi decided to fight against this act when he came to know about its injustice. This act made it compulsory to register all Asiatic if they are living in Transvaal over eight years. If they would not register themselves it would result into a crime. Gandhi held a meeting which was described in one chapter in *Indian Opinion* as 'The Advent of Satyagraha'. Here, he quoted Thoreau:

"All machines have friction and possibly this does not enough good to counter balance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But, when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are paramount, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer.' In the Asiatic Registration Act, British Indians have not only a law which has some evil in it, but is evil legalised or it represents friction with machinery provided for it. Resistance to such an evil is a divine duty."

Gandhi considered it very fortunate to be in the jail for the sake of the country and religion. He says it is one's good fortune going into the jail because there the necessities of life would be provided while the soul would be free. According to him, the readers would also be convinced that jail provides us the real road to ultimate happiness. He mentioned Thoreau by saying:

"Placed in a similar position for refusing his poll tax, the American citizen Thoreau, expressed similar thoughts in 1849. Seeing the walls of the cell in which he was confined, made of solid stone two or three feet thick and the door of wood and iron a foot thick, he said to himself thus: "I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between

me and my townsmen, there was still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was...”

Thoreau in his essay keeps insisting upon use of conscience while deciding whether any law is good or bad. He says:

“Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.” (Thoreau, 05)

Gandhi also insists upon the use of conscience in *Indian Home Rule*. In the chapter 17 ‘Passive Resistance’ he says:

“It is contrary to our manhood if we obey laws repugnant to our conscience. Such teaching is opposed to religion and means slavery.” (Gandhi, 103)

They both have same opinions regarding disobeying unjust laws. Government cannot force people to obey the laws. Gandhi opines that government does not expect such thing from people. It can certainly say that if you will not obey the laws you will get so and so punishment. They both believe that if you are right you have no need to seek for the support of majority. Gandhi says in *Indian Home Rule*:

“If man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man’s tyranny will enslave him. This is the key to Self-Rule or Home Rule. It is a superstition and ungodly thing to believe that an act of a majority binds a minority.” (Gandhi, 103)

Gandhi later on says that till the superstition of following unjust laws will exist slavery will also exist along with it. The similar thoughts Thoreau shared in his essay as following:

“Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavour to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them”. (Thoreau, 12)

South Africa provided him opportunity to evolve his own style of politics and leadership for trying out new techniques of resistance. He had already taken his movement from its ‘Moderate’ phase into its ‘Gandhian’ phase. He already knew the strengths and weaknesses of both the methods. He then considered Gandhian method to be best method around. It was now remaining for him to introduce it into India. He returned to India in 1915. His political understanding was not coinciding with any political current that were active in India then. He opined that he could only join a movement that has *Satyagraha* as its method of struggle. During 1917 and early 1918 he was involved in three important struggles, i.e., Champaran in Bihar, second in Ahmedabad and third in Kheda. All these were connected with the local issues of the peasants and the political workers.

Conclusion:

To sum up, it can be said that Gandhi could find a practical man in Thoreau who was willing to practice his own beliefs. It would be problematic to say that Gandhi did nothing original and only applied what Thoreau has been said. The idea of resistance against the authority already existed in Gandhi’s mind before he read Thoreau’s essay. The reading of essay provided a kind of impetus with which Gandhi made his struggle more powerful. He certainly showed his indebtedness to Thoreau so many times. He wrote one letter to the American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on 1st July, 1942. In the letter he wrote:

“I have profited greatly by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson. I say this to tell you how much I am connected with your country.” (Gandhi, 01)

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